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The Tabooed Editorial [1]

Amman, Jordan

Now this is something you don't see every day.

Al-Ittihad, an Abu Dhabi-based newspaper that is the semi-official mouthpiece of the United Arab Emirates, took on a series of taboo subjects with a single editorial Wednesday.

Calling the beheading of two American hostages in Iraq "repulsive" the paper criticized the targeting of "innocent people whose only fault was going to Iraq to help its people and stand by it in its calamity."

This alone was surprising. Regional sentiment runs deep for the French journalists abducted last month – France, after all opposed the war – but kidnapped Americans tend to elicit less public sympathy. No mainstream newspaper I know of advocates attacking American civilians per se, but praise for the Iraqi resistance is pretty common and anyone who has been paying attention knows that most of the main resistance groups see little distinction between American who do and do not wear uniforms.

The real surprise came in the second paragraph: "This outrageous act is in direct response to Al-Qaradawi's fatwa and incitement which permits the killing of American civilians," the paper said.

This was a reference to Youssef Al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born scholar whose religious phone-in show on Al-Jazeera has made him one of the most influential figures in the region. Depending on who you ask Al-Qaradawi is either an admirable moderate (he denounced the September 11 attacks, issued a fatwa offering limited approval for Muslims who serve in the US military and called for the release of the French journalists) or a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The latter interpretation stems, most recently, from the sheikh's declaration that it is a "duty to fight the American invaders." Asked if "invaders" included civilians the sheikh's office director said it did. At a news conference a few days later the sheikh himself said he had never called for killing civilians. This was technically true, but it had a somewhat hollow ring to it – a bit like Jerry Falwell's half-hearted recantation of his remark blaming liberals, gays and abortionists for September 11.

Taking on Al-Qaradawi like this was, by Al-Ittihad's standards, a gutsy enough thing to do. But the paper was not done yet. Addressing itself to the victims' relatives it said:

"We call upon them to file a legal case against the issuer of this fatwa for it is directly and deliberately responsible for the death of the two victims. Those who incite and instigate terrorism must receive the punishment they deserve and become an example to others."

It suggested the suit could be filed in "any Arab or Islamic country which harbours the issuers of such fatwas" and warned that he who stands "mute to the truth is a silent devil."

OK. It was one editorial in one newspaper. But in the Arab world it takes a lot of guts just now to take on either Sheikh Al-Qaradawi or the Iraqi resistance. It would be very premature to call this either a turning of the tide against conservative tele-sheikhs or the first step in a reassessment of the unthinking glorification of the violent groups that are making Iraq increasingly ungovernable.

But it is a start.